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# Voices from the diaspora: changing hierarchies and dynamics of Chinese multilingualism

LI WEI and ZHU HUA

## *Abstract*

*The so-called Chinese diasporas, i.e. Chinese communities outside Greater China (China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan), have traditionally been dialect dominant; that is, the vast majority of Chinese immigrants are speakers of (especially Southern) dialects. Cantonese and Hokkien are two of the most prominent dialects. With globalization and the rise of China as a world politico-economic power, the national, standardized variety, Putonghua, is gaining particular prestige amongst the Chinese diasporas. For example, all the Cantonese schools for British Chinese children in the UK now also teach Putonghua, but none of the Putonghua schools teach Cantonese. Using ethnographic interviews with and participant observation of Chinese people of different generations in various diasporic communities, this paper examines the changing hierarchies of varieties of Chinese, the implications of such changes for the education and identity development of the young, and the constitution of a (speech) community in the post-modern era. It focuses on language attitude and linguistic practices (including literacy practices). It also investigates the tensions between the competing ideologies and discourses on national and ethnic identities, nationalism, community relations and cultural values.*

*Keywords:* Chinese diasporas; multilingualism; language ideology; globalization.

## **1. Introduction**

Chinese is often said to have over 1.3 billion native speakers, making it the world's largest language. These 1.3 billion speakers are mainly in China, Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, but also in Chinese diasporas as far removed

as Canada, New Zealand, Peru, and South Africa. Yet, when we look at the specific languages and language varieties these people speak, we immediately realize that the Chinese speaking communities are extremely multilingual and multicultural. Indeed, the Chinese language has always been distinguished by its high level of internal diversity, although all spoken varieties of Chinese are tonal and analytic. In Mainland China, there are between seven and thirteen main regional groups of Chinese, depending on the classification scheme, of which the most widely spoken, by far, is Mandarin (about 850 million speakers), followed by Wu (90 million speakers), Min (70 million speakers) and Cantonese (70 million speakers). Most of these groups are mutually unintelligible. For an account of the history and sociolinguistics of modern Chinese, see Chen (1999). The international Organization for Standardization classifies Chinese as a macrolanguage with 13 sub-languages (ISO 639-3).

Language standardization, which in the Chinese context includes the creation of a national language, has been one of the most significant nation-building efforts ever since the First Emperor (221–206 B.C.). In fact, the introduction of the first unified writing system is often attributed to the First Emperor. In the early part of the twentieth century, a common spoken language was created, based on the northern varieties of Chinese, especially that of the capital city of Beijing. Since the founding of the People's Republic in Mainland China, more effort has been expended on the promotion of *Putonghua*, or the common language, a standardized variety that has become the official language of China. The language standardization effort had reached a certain degree of maturity by the 1970s, with the widespread use of simplified characters in mainland China and the use of *pinyin*, the romanization system, to teach Putonghua to learners. Nevertheless, diglossia, or even polyglossia, remains a common feature amongst Chinese speakers: it is common for a Chinese to be able to speak two or more varieties of regional Chinese together with standard Putonghua.

As far as the overseas Chinese diasporas are concerned, the vast majority happen to be from three coastal provinces of mainland China, i.e. Guangdong, Fujian and Hainan. These provinces are traditionally Cantonese-, Hokkien-, and Hakka-speaking, hence the prominence of these varieties amongst the overseas Chinese communities. The use of Chinese in the Chinese diasporas is determined by a large number of factors, including the migrant ancestors' origin and time of migration, assimilation through generational changes, and official policies of the country of residence. The degrees of language maintenance (of regional and local varieties of Chinese) and language shift (to the standard and national languages) vary greatly from one community to another. One noticeable change in the last twenty years has been the increase of Putonghua-speaking Chinese among the new arrivals and of Putonghua classes for overseas Chinese children across the globe.

In this paper, we focus on the language attitudes and linguistic practices, including literacy practices, of the Chinese communities in Britain, Australia and Singapore. Using data collected through ethnographic interviews, we aim to examine the changing hierarchies of varieties of the Chinese language in the Chinese diasporas, the language ideologies behind such changes, and the implications of the language ideology and of the changes for the education and identity development of the young Chinese in these communities as well as for the constitution of a (speech) community in the post-modern era.

## **2. Methodology: ethnographic interviews**

The data we use for the discussion in the present paper come from a series of ethnographic interviews we have undertaken over a period of two years (2006–2008) with a variety of Chinese people from Britain (London, Newcastle and Manchester), Australia (Sydney and Melbourne), and Singapore. Altogether we interviewed 25 people. They include both adults (9 from Britain, 3 from Australia, 5 from Singapore = 17) and children (4 from Britain, 2 from Australia, 2 from Singapore = 8) and both genders. The adults include professionals (e.g. teachers, lawyers, doctors, academics) as well as domestic workers (including two running their own restaurants). All the children were born in their current countries of residence. Four of the five adults from Singapore were born in Singapore, and the other in Malaysia. All the interviewees hold nationalities of the countries of current residence.

The interviews typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes each, although some lasted more than an hour. All the interviews were tape-recorded. The recordings were then reviewed, and detailed notes on the contents were made. Sections of the interviews were transcribed and translated for the purpose of this paper. As is characteristic in ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979), no fixed questions were posed to all the interviewees. Instead, four broad sets of topics were introduced by the interviewers (the authors of the present paper) on: (1) the interviewees' sociolinguistic background and everyday linguistic practices; (2) their views on standard Chinese and the relationship between Putonghua and other varieties of Chinese; (3) the importance of knowing the Chinese language by overseas Chinese children who are born and brought up overseas; and (4) changes in the overseas Chinese communities. In effect, the interviews were open discussions around these topics, and the objective was to obtain some insights into the interviewees' perspectives on these issues. The interviews with the adults were conducted in Chinese, with occasional codeswitching into English. The interviews with the children were a mixture of English and Chinese. Below we discuss what the interviewees said around the four themes.

### 3. Who are Chinese speakers? Is Cantonese not Chinese?

One of the most remarkable facts of the interviews we conducted for the present study is the forthrightness with which the participants expressed their views on who can be classified as Chinese speakers and what “the Chinese language” actually means. All the interviewees said that “knowing” Chinese was an integral part of being Chinese — 华人当然应当懂华语啦! ‘Chinese people should of course know the Chinese language!’ (SA4 = Singapore adult 4), 不懂中文还是中国人吗? ‘How can Chinese not know Chinese?’ (BA2 = British adult 2). Their notions of Chinese and “knowing” are particularly worth noting. The following is an exchange between the interviewer and one adult interviewee in Britain.

(1)

BA3: *Chinese*就是中文啦嘛! *Mandarin*, 普通话。

‘Chinese is Zhongwen! Mandarin, Putonghua.’

I1: 那广东话呢?

‘What about Cantonese then?’

BA3: 广东话是我们说得啦。广东话是我们在家里说的, 和朋友。广东话在香港可以。现在香港也讲普通话啦。那是国语嘛。中国人要讲国语。

‘Cantonese is what we speak. Cantonese is what we use at home, with friends. Cantonese is OK in Hong Kong. Nowadays even Hong Kong speaks Putonghua. That’s the national language (*guoyu*). Chinese people should speak the national language (*guoyu*).’

I1: 那不懂国语就不是中国人了吗?

‘Aren’t they Chinese if they don’t know the national language (*guoyu*)?’

BA3: 那也不能那么说。可是你要是问我, 我就得说不懂国语就不是中国人, 中国人都应当懂国语。

‘You can’t say that. But if you ask me, I have to say that if you don’t know the national language (*guoyu*), you are not Chinese. Chinese people should know the national language (*guoyu*).’

I1: Mandarin 还是普通话?

‘Mandarin or Putonghua?’

BA3: 都差不多啦。现在都叫普通话。

‘Not much difference. Everybody calls it Putonghua now.’

The exchange reveals an important issue, i.e. perceived hierarchy amongst different varieties of Chinese. The interviewee seems very clear that Cantonese should be confined to specific domains such as conversations with family and friends. It is a regional variety and has no role at the national and international level, despite the fact that it has been the *lingua franca* in many overseas Chi-

nese communities for generations. Whereas Putonghua is clearly a national language in his view and all Chinese people should know it. With regard to the difference between Mandarin and Putonghua, this particular interviewee is as vague as most other people and seems to think that it was only a matter of terminology. In fact, Mandarin is the English name often used for northern varieties of Chinese. It is used to refer to the standard national language in Taiwan and Singapore where the Chinese term is 国语 (*guoyu*) and 华语 (*huayu*) respectively. Putonghua is a term from mainland China and it is gaining currency amongst Chinese diasporas in recent years. We will return to this point later in the paper.

Later in the same interview, the interviewer probed further the interviewee's notion of "knowing the national language".

(2)

I1: 您说的懂国语是指什么？是能听懂吗？

'What do you mean when you say "knowing the national language (*guoyu*)? Is it to understand it?'

BA3: 听，还有写，看和读。小孩子们现在都看不懂中文，不能沟通。

'Understand, and also write, read. Children now can't read Chinese, can't communicate.'

I1: 那他们能听得懂，也能说，不就行了吗？

'But they can understand and speak it. Is it not enough?'

BA3: 在家里是可以的。可是我们中国人要讲能读书写字，不能读不能写就等于不懂中文。那么多好的书都不能看。有的连自己的名字也不认识。

'It's OK at home. But we Chinese people should be able to read and write. Unable to read or write equals not knowing Chinese. Can't read all those good books. Some can't even recognize their own name.'

The emphasis on literacy is one of the most consistent findings in all the studies of children's language development among the Chinese diasporas worldwide (see studies in He and Xiao 2008). This is not only because of the long standing cultural tradition in literacy education in China (e.g. Bond 1992), but also because of the strong belief amongst the Chinese people that there are intricate cultural values inherent in the written Chinese characters that cannot be conveyed in any other way. We will discuss this point further under language ideology in the next section.

The views expressed by this particular interviewee (BA3 in the examples above) are shared across all the other interviewees: to qualify as Chinese, one must know the language, and to know the language means to be able to read and write the written characters. One extreme version of the view was expressed by one of the adults from Australia (AA1), who said:

- (3) 小孩子不懂中文不能算中国人。只能听得懂，但不能读和写也不能算是中国人，起码不能算地道的中国人。我不管他生长在那里，他是中国人就必须会读会写。

‘Children can’t be regarded as Chinese if they don’t know the Chinese language. Only to be able to understand but not being able to read or write Chinese does not qualify them as Chinese, at least not proper Chinese. I don’t care where they are being brought up, they must be able to read and write Chinese to be Chinese.’

There have been many reports from different parts of the world on how seriously the Chinese parents take the literacy education of the young. The Chinese complementary (heritage language) schools in Britain and North America spend most of their teaching time on the reading and writing of Chinese characters (e.g. Curdt-Christiansen 2008). Such emphasis on literacy seems to have had some effect on the children. All our young interviewees agreed that to be able to read and write Chinese character was very important, although they were less emphatic about it being an integral part of their Chinese identity.

The perceived hierarchy amongst the different varieties of the Chinese language as revealed by our interviews is another point worth commenting on. While we had expected the interviewees from Singapore to be more conscious of the hierarchy, due to the explicit language policies of Singapore discouraging the use of regional Chinese varieties in public domains, we did not expect to hear such clear and strong expressions from the others. Here is one example:

- (4) 广东话、福建话、客家话都是方言呀。在家里用当然可以的。和你的家人、同乡当然没什么问题。就像你是北京人，当然想说北京话。可是你跟北京人说可以，跟其它的人就应当讲普通话了嘛。英语也有BBC英语，法语也有它标准国语。普通话是我们的标准国语。中国人当然要讲普通话。否则人家怎么知道你是中国人？你可能是广东人、上海人、北京人，但你要是中国人就要讲普通话。(BA6)

‘Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka are all dialects. They can of course be used at home. No problem to use them with your family and people from your home town. It is like you are from Beijing and you want to speak Beijing dialect. You can do so with people from Beijing. But with others you should speak Putonghua. English has BBC English. French has its standard national language. Putonghua is our standard national language. Chinese people certainly should speak Putonghua. Otherwise how can people know that you are Chinese? You may be Cantonese, Shanghainese or Pekingese. But if you want to be Chinese, you need to speak Putonghua.’

The views expressed by our interviewees on varieties of the Chinese language and the importance of the written form can be seen as manifestations of the Language Ideology of the speakers. We now discuss this issue in more detail.



#### 4. Language ideology: what language can do? Literacy/written language as a core cultural value

*Language ideology* refers to the perceptions held by people about a specific language or language in general, what language can do, and how language should be used. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes define *language ideology* as “in-grained, unquestioned beliefs about the way the world is, the way it should be, and the way it has to be with respect to language” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006: 9). Irvine talks about language ideology in terms of “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine 1989: 253). Language ideology has significant implications not only for language policy and planning — for instance, standard language ideology often biases towards idealized national norms as maintained and imposed by dominant social groups and institutions and against minority language users (e.g. Lippi-Green’s [1997] discussion of the standard language ideology in the United States) — but also for individual speakers in actual use of languages. Their everyday language behavior is influenced by what they believe about the language they are using.

Within the Chinese speaking communities, language ideology is a major issue. Despite the fact that the so-called dialects, or *fangyan* (‘regional languages’), of Chinese are structurally distinctive and mutually unintelligible, the popular belief, reinforced by public discourse, is that there is a common language. Here are some responses to our question 标准汉语/中文指的是什么? ‘What is Standard Chinese?’:

- (5) 普通话就是标准中文嘛。 (BA5)  
‘Putonghua is Standard Chinese.’
- (6) 标准汉语就是普通话啦。 (SA4)  
‘Standard Chinese is Putonghua.’
- (7) 大陆人讲的普通话是最标准的中文了。 (BA7)  
‘The Putonghua spoken by people from Mainland China is the most standard Chinese.’

When further probed on what specific criteria they use to judge whether a person was speaking the Standard Chinese, the following exchange illustrates a somewhat confused, yet extremely common, view:

- (8)  
BA4: 北京话比较标准。  
‘Beijing speech is rather standard.’
- I2: 为什么呢?  
‘Why is that?’

- BA4: 发音最主要。标不标准能听出来。  
 ‘Pronunciation is the most important. You can tell whether it is standard by hearing the accent.’
- I2: 可是北京人说话也有口音呀。  
 ‘But people from Beijing speak with an accent too.’
- BA4: 但还是要比我们广东人讲的标准嘛。我们的乡音很重了，很多人都听不懂的。  
 ‘But theirs is much more standard than what we Cantonese speak. Our local accent is very strong. Many people can’t understand us.’
- I2: 那口音不一样还能算标准话吗？  
 ‘Can it still be regarded as standard if the accent is different?’
- BA4: 还有写字啦。我们有标准汉字啦。听不懂可以写啦。  
 ‘There is also the writing. We have standard characters. You can always write if you don’t understand.’

The significance of the written form as a vehicle of communicating across different spoken varieties is repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees:

- (9) 从秦始皇起就有统一文字，我们中国的汉字就是我们语言的标准。 (BA2)  
 ‘There has been a unified writing system since the First Emperor. Our Chinese characters are our standard language.’

As we discussed earlier, all Chinese schools, in and outside China, spend a large amount of their time on the teaching of written characters. Most Chinese people hold the view that one cannot be regarded as knowing the language without being able to read and write the Chinese characters.

Our interviews also revealed that the written Chinese characters have a particular cultural symbolism in the Chinese diasporas. One young interviewee told us:

- (10) *My dad buys these Chinese paintings, well, actually they are not paintings. They are just Chinese words, but written in big letters, all curving and waving, like paintings, in ink. It does look very nice. He hangs them up in the house. I think it’s very nice.* (AC1)

Chinese calligraphy is taught as an art form in Chinese school, as another child whom we interviewed told us:

- (11) *At the Chinese school, we are taught calligraphy. It’s like painting. It’s quite fun.* (BC2)

The use of Chinese written characters as a cultural symbol seems to be widespread. It certainly is true that most Chinese households have decorations which consist of Chinese written characters, as the following interviewee confirms:

- (12) 你一看到有汉字，噢，你到唐人街啦。你如果走到一条街上，看到一家里有书画，你就知道那一定是中国人家。 (AA2)

‘You know you are in Chinatown when you see Chinese characters. If you are walking on the street and see a house with Chinese calligraphy, you can tell that it is a Chinese household.’

It appears to be particularly salient to use written characters as Chinese cultural symbols in the overseas diasporas:

- (13) 我希望小孩子看到我们中国的书法能联想到中国。这是我们老祖宗给的，不能忘了。他们没去过中国但也能看看中国书法、水墨画等等。 (AA1)

‘I hope that when children see our Chinese calligraphy, they can think of China. That’s what our ancestors gave us. We shouldn’t forget it. They may not have been to China. But they can look at Chinese calligraphy and ink painting.’

- (14) 我们这些人写得都不行。看到人家的书法，真好看，漂亮。你看到这么好的书法，不能不想起中国呀。 (BA7)

‘Our handwriting isn’t very good. When you see the calligraphy, it is so nice and so beautiful. When you see such good calligraphy, how can you not think of China?’

Some of our interviewees even expressed their belief that the Chinese written characters gave its readers certain cognitive advantage, as the following comments illustrate:

- (15) 报纸上说了，汉字是最科学的。懂汉字的人抽象思维好。 (BA3)

‘The newspaper says that Chinese characters are the most scientific. People who can read Chinese characters are better at abstract reasoning.’

- (16) 我们中国的汉字非常地有意义。又能表型，又能表意。 (BA4)

‘Our Chinese characters are extremely meaningful. They can represent form and meaning.’

- (17) 汉字是难学，但你学好了，比别的文字要有好处。学别的语言就要容易。 (SA2)

‘Chinese characters are hard to learn. But if you learn them well, you have an advantage over (users of) other writing systems. It’s easier to learn other languages.’

Such language ideology amongst Chinese speakers seems to have a significant influence on their linguistic behavior. Many of our interviewees expressed a concern that some of the teachers at the Chinese schools in Britain and Australia are not speaking standard Putonghua. These include the children who are attending Chinese schools or classes:

- (18) *Some of the teachers are from Hong Kong. Their Putonghua isn't very good.* (BC1)
- (19) *We have a Taiwanese teacher. She speaks a bit funny.* (AC2)

Most of our interviewees believe that if they want to learn Putonghua, they should follow the models of standard pronunciation and grammar, and that standard pronunciation and grammar are best produced by people from north of Mainland China, especially Beijing.

With regard to the emphasis on written characters, many of our interviewees remarked on the traditional practice of repeated copying:

- (20) 学写汉字就要抄。要抄很多很多遍才行。 (SA2)  
 'Learning to write Chinese characters has to do with repeated copying. You need to copy many, many times.'
- (21) 我们以前小的时候要描红模子。老师很重视书法。只是写对了不行，还要写得好看。 (AA1)  
 'We used to trace over the red models when we were little. Teachers paid a lot of attention to handwriting. Writing correctly wasn't enough. You had to write nicely too.'
- (22) *If we make a mistake, the teacher asks us to write 100 times.* (AC2)

How does the language ideology expressed by our interviewees influence their views on the relationship between language and identity? We have already seen comments which suggest that our interviewees regard knowing the Chinese language, particularly the written form, as an integral part of being Chinese. We now discuss this issue further with more examples from the interviews.

## 5. Relationship between language and identity: on not speaking Chinese

Whilst our interviewees all seem to agree on the general cultural significance of the Chinese language, there is considerable disagreement and debate, especially between the different generations, with regard to the relationship between language and identity. Most of our adult interviewees started the interviews with a position that to be Chinese one has to know the Chinese language. Yet, during the discussions and exchanges with the interviewers, some of our adult interviewees accepted that there is now a significant proportion of overseas Chinese who do not know much Chinese. An insistence on knowing the written form of the language would make the identification of what they would regard as "proper Chinese people" even more demanding, as many overseas

Chinese can understand the spoken form but cannot read or write the characters. Language shift is happening very rapidly in the Chinese diasporas. Many of the second generation already use English or other local languages as their primary means of communication. Most of the third and fourth generations have completely lost the ability to read and write Chinese. This clearly poses a challenge not only to the internal cohesion of the Chinese communities but also to their beliefs about the importance of the language in the Chinese cultural traditions. The following two examples illustrate what the adults in our sample think:

- (23) 我觉得语言和你的*identity*的确有关系。我经常看到像是中国人样子，但你听她讲英语，你也不知道她是不是中国人，不敢跟她说话。 (AA3)  
 ‘I think that language and identity are indeed linked. I often see Chinese-looking people, but they speak English and you don’t know if they are Chinese or not. I don’t dare to speak to them.’
- (24) 中国人当然还是应当讲中国话啦。英国人讲英国话，日本人讲日本话，印度人讲印度话。我们中国人也应当讲中国话啦。 (BA5)  
 ‘Chinese people should of course speak Chinese. English people speak English. Japanese speak Japanese. Indians speak Indian. We Chinese also should speak Chinese.’
- (25) 不讲中文也不能说他不是中国人啦。那很多印度人不也都讲英语吗？但他还是印度人嘛。可是一点中文也不懂，我看也是问题。 (SA1)  
 ‘You can’t say he isn’t Chinese just because he doesn’t speak Chinese. Many Indians also speak English. But they are still Indian. But if you don’t know Chinese at all, I think there is a problem.’
- (26) 现在确实有很多年轻人不讲中文。我们的孩子也是一样。他们平时都是和讲英语的在一起，就是和别的华人小孩在一起也讲英语。中文讲不好没关系，但我还是认为他们应当讲中文。否则你跟别人有什么差别？ (BA4)  
 ‘Nowadays many young people really don’t speak Chinese. Our children are like that. They are always with English speakers. Even if they are with other Chinese children, they speak English. It doesn’t matter if their Chinese isn’t very good. I think they should speak Chinese. Otherwise how can you tell the difference between yourself and other people?’
- (27) 在这里的小孩子吃的、穿的都和英国人没什么差别，如果一点中国话也不会讲，那怎么叫中国人？ (BA9)  
 ‘There isn’t a lot of difference in the way our children here eat and dress from that of the English people. If they don’t speak a word of Chinese either, how can we call them Chinese?’

The children whom we interviewed presented a rather different perspective on the issue of language and identity. All of them, including those from Singapore, are conscious of the fact that their Chinese is not as strong as their English and many have experienced difficulty with Chinese literacy. Yet all of them feel very strongly that they are Chinese. They belong to a new generation of overseas Chinese who are multilingual and multicultural. They have created a new social space for themselves through their social practices, including their multilingual practices (Li Wei forthcoming). They want to develop their distinctive identity as multilingual and multicultural individuals and as a new group of Chinese transnationals:

- (28) *Apart from our parents, nobody thinks we are not Chinese. We look Chinese. We eat Chinese food. We know lots of things about China and the Chinese culture that other people don't know. OK, I don't speak Mandarin. But I can if I want to. I can't read much. I never learned it. I talk to my friends in English. But I am still Chinese. I'm not Chinese Chinese, like from China. I speak some Chinese when I'm with my Chinese friends. We all speak English and Chinese together. My parents think my Chinese isn't good enough. But I can understand what people say in Chinese. My friends are all like that too. It's good enough for us. (AC2)*
- (29) *I don't know where I will be when I'm older. Maybe I'll be somewhere else, like my parents who moved here from Hong Kong. So I may be speaking Spanish, or Japanese. I know I should learn some Chinese. But you can't learn just one language. Speaking a language isn't all who you are. I want to speak as many languages as I can. I want to travel the world. I don't think people will think I'm not Chinese. Maybe they do, but it doesn't bother me. I know I am Chinese. (BC1)*
- (30) *I do feel I'm Chinese. I think I see things differently, sometimes, from my friends. Maybe that's just the way I'm brought up. I can still see things differently without speaking Chinese. (BC2)*

The differences in the views expressed by our adult and child interviewees reveal a tension within the Chinese diasporas concerning the relationship between language and identity. It seems that some of the adults have consciously or subconsciously adopted what Ang (2001: 30) calls "an essentialist and absolute notion of Chineseness", based on blood, language and customs, while the children want a more dynamic and fluid definition of Chineseness, which would defy the notion of a fixed racial, linguistic and cultural content. The different viewpoints also reveal another version of a monolingual ideology which sees bilinguals as two perfect and balanced monolinguals combined in one body. The ideology seems to be behind the way the adults perceive what they see as a deficit in the children's linguistic abilities; i.e. they all speak good

English but their Chinese is not good. Elsewhere we have discussed this ideology as it manifests itself in the linguistic practices of Chinese complementary schools in Britain (Li Wei and Wu 2009; Li Wei et al. 2009). The younger generations of Chinese are beginning to challenge such monolingual ideologies. They want to be regarded as bilinguals and multilinguals, not monolinguals, and they want to be so in a dynamic and creative way utilizing all the linguistic and cultural resources they have and going beyond the confines of the one-language-one-context convention.

We now turn to the last theme of the interviews we conducted, i.e. ongoing changes within the Chinese diasporas.

## **6. Globalization and implications for Chinese and Chinese speaking communities**

The current, unprecedented scale of globalization has had a massive impact on the Chinese diasporas. Our interviewees commented on three aspects of change within the Chinese communities that can be seen as consequences of globalization. First, exchanges between the Chinese communities in different parts of the world are increasing rapidly. Cities such as London, Manchester, and Sydney have seen increases in new Chinese immigrants who have previously settled in other parts of Europe, the Asian Pacific, Latin America and South Africa. Several of our interviewees reported that they have relatives who used to live in different parts of the world but now live in the same cities as themselves, and spoke of relatives going to join others in the family in North America or Asia. Contacts with Chinese communities within Britain and Australia and with those in Europe and New Zealand are also on the increase. There is a great deal of sharing of information and social support. People use travel agents, accountants, legal advisors and medical care in locations other than their own place of residence. Even ten years ago, such practices were rare. But now they are a common feature within the Chinese communities.

Second is the noticeable increase of new immigrants from Mainland China. They tend to be better educated and wealthier than the last generation of Chinese immigrants thirty or forty years ago. They go for the standard professional jobs rather than family-based employment. Interactions between the new arrivals and the more settled, older immigrants do take place, but in limited domains. Usually the older immigrants provide services such as restaurants and supermarkets that the new arrivals use. On the whole, there is little resentment from the older immigrants. The new arrivals have given them more business opportunities and they have benefited from the rising profile of the Chinese communities generally. Nevertheless, there are tensions between the new and the older immigrants who see their residence in the UK or Australia as serving



rather different purposes. Many of the new arrivals see their coming to countries such as Britain and Australia as an opportunity. They choose to migrate because it is a step towards better careers and better lives in their view. The older immigrants, on the other hand, did not have such choice. They left Hong Kong and China because the rapid urbanization and industrialization at the time restricted rather than created opportunities for them. Many could not find the jobs that they really wanted. They felt that they were forced to go abroad. The tensions between the new and older groups are particularly acute with regard to the children. Many of the older immigrants see the young new arrivals as being too spoilt. They had to work extremely hard for their own children, whereas many of the new arrivals seem to have everything they need provided for them. It is true that some of the new arrivals come from the “new rich” in Mainland China. But the perception that all, or the majority of, the new arrivals are wealthy and have socio-political connections is clearly mistaken. Some of the new arrivals do choose to send their children to private schools and buy them fashionable clothing. But the number of such families is not significantly different from that of the older, more settled Chinese immigrant families who often invest in private education and give their children generous allowances.

Perhaps one on-going change in the Chinese diasporas that is most relevant to the present study is the rising profile of Putonghua and its perceived social economic advantages. This is clearly related to the rising profile of China as a world politico-economic power. Our interviews took place during the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, when there was unprecedented press coverage of mainland China. The overseas Chinese are generally very proud of what China achieved. They have adopted the public discourse of Mainland China that a powerful China would provide a strong backing to overseas diasporas. With the increase in power of Mainland China came the attempt to promote Putonghua both within and beyond the Chinese communities. We reported elsewhere that all the Cantonese schools in Britain (about 210 across the country) offer Putonghua classes; yet none of the Putonghua schools (approximately 30) teach Cantonese or any other regional varieties of Chinese (Li Wei and Wu 2009). Putonghua has very strong institutional support, from the Chinese embassies and non-governmental organizations such as the Confucius Institutes, as well as the British and Australian educational and cultural establishments. More and more local schools in Britain and Australia offer Putonghua classes and there are television and other broadcasting services in Putonghua in these countries. Our interviewees clearly see the economic opportunities associated with Putonghua, as the following comments illustrate:

- (31) 中国越来越有影响啦。越来越多的人学中文、学普通话。我们的小孩子也让他们学普通话。以后可能的话也可以到中国工作嘛。 (AA3)



‘China is increasingly influential. More and more people are learning Chinese, learning Putonghua. I want our children to learn Putonghua too. They can go and work in China in the future if possible.’

- (32) 伦敦有许多公司都要会讲普通话的人。你要会讲普通话，找工作容易得很。 (BA4)  
 ‘London has many companies that need people speaking Putonghua. If you can speak Putonghua, it is very easy to find a job.’
- (33) *I think learning Putonghua is useful. I don't know if I want to go to live in China right now. But I can work for a Chinese company in Australia.* (AC1)
- (34) *There are certainly more opportunities if you know Chinese. There are so many visitors from mainland China. And the Chinese students. If you know Putonghua, you can talk to them.* (BC3)

As for the effect of the spread of Putonghua on other varieties of Chinese, one young interviewee's remark says it all:

- (35) *My family speak Hakka. That's because my grandparents spoke Hakka. My parents actually speak Cantonese a lot. I used to know Hakka. But after my grandma died, nobody use it any more. I'm learning Putonghua now. I think Cantonese is pretty much useless now. People from China only speak Putonghua. So you can only speak Cantonese at home. It's useless outside the family.* (BC5)

The rising influence of China has had a huge impact not only on the Chinese communities in Britain and Australia but also on Singapore. Our Singaporean interviewees expressed the view that globalization provided more opportunities than before for contacts with China; made them more aware of the Chinese cultural traditions; more exposure to Putonghua, as well as more contacts with Chinese people from other Chinese diasporas. The following are some examples of what they said:

- (36) *We used to speak English at work. Our company didn't like us speak Chinese. But now they don't mind. There are some people from China. And we all talk Chinese.* (SA2)
- (37) *I've had a few trips to China. We bought our children with us too. They love it. They think it's more authentic there. What we have in Singaporean is a mixture of Chinese and western. China is more authentic.* (SA4)
- (38) *We hear a lot of Putonghua on TV. The announcers maybe from China. Our teachers tell us to copy them. It's more standard.* (SC2)

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the language attitudes and practices within the overseas Chinese diasporas as expressed through interviews with a cross-sectional group of Chinese people from Britain, Australia and Singapore. There seems to be considerable consistency across the sample in terms of their views on what the Chinese language refers to, the internal hierarchies amongst the various varieties, and the significance of the written form. We have revealed a strong language ideology which seems to dominate the Chinese diasporas and to influence the linguistic practices of the Chinese people. This language ideology can be summarized as follows: (1) there is a standard Chinese language and it is represented by Putonghua; (2) whatever the spoken variety of Chinese, the written Chinese characters are common to all and are part of the standard form of the language; (3) the Chinese language, especially the written form, is an important cultural symbol and has certain advantages over other languages; (4) to be “proper” Chinese, one must know the Chinese language, especially the written form, which needs to be learned through repeated copying. This language ideology can be seen in action in Chinese families, Chinese schools as well as public institutions. It is also affecting the Chinese people’s view of the relationship between language and identity.

Our interviews revealed some interesting tensions between the generations in terms of their perspectives on language and identity. Most of the adults seem to have maintained the conventional view that knowing the language is integral to being Chinese. The younger generations, on the other hand, adopt a more flexible approach to identity which is not narrowly based on racial and linguistic grounds but more on broad socio-cultural practices. The tensions between maintaining the tradition and creating a new generation of “proper” Chinese and developing new identities as multilingual and multicultural transnationals will no doubt be a major challenge to the Chinese diasporas in the years to come.

The ongoing changes within the Chinese diasporas, caused in no small measure by globalization, present further challenges to the communities. With regard to language, it seems clear that Putonghua is taking over as the politically and economically dominant language, and regional language varieties such as Cantonese, Hakka and Hokkien, are losing their place to Putonghua. This, coupled with the standard language ideology which seems to be shared by most Chinese people, will no doubt impact on the communities’ internal cohesion, the education of the younger generations of Chinese overseas, and future contacts between the diasporas, mainland China and places of origins and ancestry. Whether the future for regional Chinese language varieties is as bleak as the view of our child interviewee in (35) is not entirely certain. One thing is sure, though, and that is that the dynamics within the Chinese diasporas are changing and there is an increasing influence exercised by the rising power of

mainland China and everything that represents China, including its standard national language.

From a more theoretical point of view, the case we have presented in this paper with regard to the Chinese diasporas invites a critical reflection on the key sociolinguistic concept of “speech community” (e.g. Labov 1972). Whilst there are some debates in the literature on exactly how a *speech community* is defined, most sociolinguists tend to emphasize shared community membership and shared linguistic communication. Our study suggests that language ideology plays an important role in people’s perception of the relationship between language and identity, which in turn affects the linguistic practices of the speakers. The concepts of language ideology and identity therefore need to be considered seriously in defining a speech community. This, in our view, is particularly important in an era which is characterized by complex, large-scale population movements and transnational and transcultural interactions.

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